

Happy consumers, loyal voters: voter reaction to incumbent performance in English local governments, 1999-2006¹

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Abstract

This paper tests for the impact of performance and citizen perception of public services upon the vote shares of incumbent administrations. The rationale is that electors will reward an administration that performs well and punish one that does not. Developing this idea, the paper sets out three accounts of the impact of performance: the proportionate, the cognitive and the conditional, which are tested on a panel dataset of 148 English principal local authorities, 1999-2006. The paper estimates fixed effect models of the vote share of the incumbent controlling for previous vote, whether the incumbent is of the national governing party, local economic conditions, and vote marginality. The models find that measured performance does not predict vote share, but that satisfaction with local authorities does. Levels of local tax negatively predicts the vote, suggesting the voters punish local government for high council taxes. There is some evidence of negativity bias in performance evaluation in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment model. Overall, these preliminary findings offer some support for the cognitive model of incumbent evaluation.

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Democracies function effectively by electors threatening to punish poor performance of the incumbent administration at the polls or conversely rewarding good performance. The ‘responsibility hypothesis’ - also called the ‘reward-punish’ hypothesis - suggests electors keep the governed on their toes by noticing dips or jumps in performance and acting accordingly. We expect such a connection to work because otherwise leaders would be able to get away with poor performance, or electors would have to rely on the altruism or value systems of the governed rather than the powerful incentive of re-election. In the most researched aspect of this phenomenon, economic voting, studies find that incumbents are often held responsible for macro-economic performance and rewarded or punished in proportion to these levels (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000; Sanders 2000; Clarke et al. 2004; Wlezien 2004, de Brug et al. 2007). Non-economic factors have been noted as important including civil rights and foreign policy at times of conflict (Fiorina 1981). Some research suggests that the quality of public services had an influence on support for the Conservative incumbent in the 1997 election in Britain (Bartle 2003; Johnston and Pattie 2001). Electors take note and act upon performance information at the local level in England, punishing poor-performing local authorities (James and John 2006). Electors may react in favour of educational performance, for example (Brender 2003). Electors may also use ‘voice’ as a protest against dissatisfaction, say with local taxes or services (Dowding and John 2006).

Unfortunately theory does not indicate the manner and degree to which responsiveness occurs. Is there an immediate correction and punishment with electors punishing incumbents in proportion to the fault? Do electors give incumbents a chance to improve performance if there is a dip, in other words do we have mature voters who can attribute blame? Because of the theoretical indeterminacy, we have decided to offer different accounts of the relationship between incumbent support and voter approval suitable for testing.

Theory

So how can we conceptualise the degree and character of the electoral response to the performance of incumbent governments? We draw on some general accounts of the relationship between governors and governed to develop an account of the performance impact, and set them out as three different approaches, ranging from the most straightforward to the most complex.

The proportionate model The first is that there is a continuous and gradual relationship between the two, with electors watching carefully the actions of the governed, and voting accordingly when the opportunity comes. In the opinion-policy literature this is represented by Wlezien's thermostatic model (Wlezien 1995) for the US, which has been applied to the UK by Wlezien and Soroka (2005), in the 'degrees of democracy' project, whose title indicates the underlying gradualist conceptions (<http://degreesofdemocracy.mcgill.ca/>). In performance terms, we can conceive of a constant relationship between performance and electoral reaction, as a proportion of change – a linear model. It is possible to adapt this model by allowing electors not to react to small changes of performance or to huge jumps that appear out of character with previous trends, which would modify the proportions, and weight the performance past performance. However, in essence it is tested by assuming that it is possible to fit a regression line around all areas and time periods.

In this first model, there are good reasons to think that electors will take account of performance information in this linear manner. The performance of public services is an important issue because it is the main activity of local authorities. Recently, attempts have been made to improve the information available to voters about the performance of these authorities in a Comprehensive Performance Assessment, partly to strengthen the link

between performance and political participation (James and John 2006). Performance influences on incumbent support might be particularly important in English local government relative to other sites, although many factors need to be taken into account when assessing the relationship.

The importance of context, especially the clarity of responsibility for policymaking is being increasingly noted in electoral studies (Anderson 2000). It is often hard for citizens to observe accurately the marginal adjustments in the aggregates of employment, inflation and economic activity that result from policy instruments rather than the international economy, and from autonomous domestic investment and consumption decisions. By contrast, local public bureaucracies delivering public services might be expected to be under more direct control by politicians with citizens more justifiably holding politicians to account for their performance. These local level bodies are often more limited in the range of services they provide than national, regional or state governments, with their activities established and run under laws and executive commands with regular public financing and oversight. English local government consists of units that are near exclusively responsible for providing a set of nationally prescribed local public services and little else. The overwhelming majority of expenditure is on mandated services and there are statutory limitations and financial disincentives to providing other services. The English local electoral system can promote a strong link between voting and rewarding or punishing incumbents because there is usually one party in control of the administration. It is a first-past-the post election system and the election mechanism within each electoral district or ward is reasonably clear. On these arguments, citizens may be more likely to vote on performance than at the national level. The local electorate may be more likely to view local incumbents as responsible for performance than in other contexts. In national economic voting it has been suggested that this will vary according to individuals' views of the feasibility of performance given their

view of how the macro-economy functions (Chappell and Goncalves Veiga 2000). The question arises, of course, as to whether these factors are applicable locally.

Voters may be better informed about local public services than many national policy areas. As users of local services they are in direct contact with them. Although degree of use of services varies, local word of mouth from those who have had contact with them is likely to be particularly strong in a local community. More formal systems for provision of performance information have also been instituted, with a published Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of each local authority issued by an independent monitoring body from 2002 onwards. The CPA revealed information about performance not previously easily available to voters and had an impact on electoral support for incumbents. Negativity bias was evident, with incumbents punished for poor performance but not equally rewarded for good performance (James and John 2006). In the context of this paper, this previous work suggests that the relationship between performance and incumbent support would be stronger for elections after the introduction of the CPA scheme than before because voters have a much clearer measure of performance to make the overall judgement, whereas before they had the plethora of performance measures, whose interpretation baffle experts on local government let alone the hapless voter.

The cognitive model. The second model is one that is based on limited cognitive power of electors to process information. But rather than yielding incremental decision-making in the classic Simonesque mode, it can produce periods of stability when attention is elsewhere and where changes are in the realm of small departures from trend, to where there is a large reaction based on larger changes, or other factors that cause electors to focus on the public sector so that they may even react to small changes in performance once alerted. This is an issue-attention model as outlined in the work of Baumgartner and Jones (2005), where the agenda may not change at all for a long period of time, and then changes rapidly,

punctuating the equilibrium. In this model absolute changes in performance will not affect electoral behaviour necessarily, but they will do if the electorate focuses on the administration because of the change in performance or a change in the performance of neighbouring authorities as in the Besley and Case (1995) yardstick model, and periods when performance information has an impact and not.

This model would suggest that voters have little information upon which to judge the performance of local authorities, such as knowing the performance score for example. Political knowledge in western democracies tends to be low (Carpini and Keeter 1997). Studies of the satisfaction with local authorities find that satisfaction can fall even when the performance of the local authority is rising (Cabinet Office, MORI), though expectations can explain part of the disjuncture. This lack of information can be disrupted when there is a major change in performance sufficient for the electorate to notice, or a change in measurement such as the introduction of performance information itself, which can be modelled as a shock to the system (James and John 1996). The other implication of the cognitive model is that it not just relevant to measure the performance of the services themselves, but how they are perceived by the voters, in terms of their satisfaction.

The conditional model. The third model is where the incumbent-electorate information is conditional upon other factors, which is an attractive model because it relates to the inherent instability found in the literature about economic voting, that it is not possible to observe stable relationship over time (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000), with the implication that more precise, time-variant and partial models are more applicable. There are some other advantages to seeing the relationship in this manner as one that is not necessarily linear but depends on the existence of other conditions that make the operation of the relationship more or less likely. The first is the visibility of the service to the electorate in terms of the numbers it affects, its inherent media friendly quality, and the overall budget size for the public

authority on the ground the performance of low expenditures services is less important than of high expenditure services. The second is the extent to which the authority can be considered responsible for performance of the service, which may depend on the relationship between it and the service provider. The classic problem service in England is education which is the responsibility of individual schools, much less the elected local government which transfers money to it and has a regulatory role. Of course, electors may not realise that schools are run in this way and blame the elected local government, but at least the reality of administrative relations sets up the possibility they may not blame the government for problems in the local schools. The third is the availability of an alternative, as has been highlighted in the economic voting literature, in terms of closeness of the results increasing the utility of an individual vote and the quality of the challenger. The fourth factor is the clarity of responsibility whether there is a single party in control, whether there is a minority coalition, or where there is strong leadership.

The best possible way to test out the relationship between public service performance and electoral choice is when there is data observed over a number of time periods. Here with public authorities it is often the case that performance management systems are temporary and succeed each other with bewildering regularity. But with local government in England it is possible to observe the use of performance data over a reasonably long time period from the late 1990s to the present day when many of the performance management indicators remained in place for successive years. In this paper we analyze the relationship between the performance of public services and election outcomes for local authorities in England.

Data

Our data concern the 1999-2006 period for upper tier English local governments. These are the authorities that have the primary service provision responsibilities. Data have been collected from Local Election Handbooks (Thrasher and Rallings, multiple years), the BBC local elections coverage, the “Political Control in Great Britain” maps issued by the consultancy PPS, the Audit Commission, the Office of National Statistics, and the Department of Communities and Local Government.

Our dependent variable is the electoral support (in percent) for the incumbent party/parties. In the case of councils that were controlled by a single party in the year before the election under consideration, this variable contains the vote share of that party in the election under consideration. In the case of councils that were controlled by a coalition of two or more parties in the year before the election under consideration, this variable contains the sum of the vote shares of those major parties (Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats) involved in the coalition in the year before the election under consideration. Note that we currently only have data on the composition of coalitions for 2002, 2005, and 2006 (following the elections in these years in councils that held elections). We chose to look at electoral support for the incumbent rather than whether or not the incumbent was re-elected because the latter would only be an indirect indicator of electoral judgment on the incumbent. This is due to the nature of the first-past-the-post system used in English local elections, which frequently produces a substantial divergence between the vote share of a party and the seat share it wins on the council (Rallings and Thrasher 1997, 110-115).

We have three sets of explanatory variables: performance variables, political variables, and control variables. Performance and political variables allow us to empirically represent some of the propositions developed in the theory section. The control variables

help us exclude some plausible alternative explanations for how the incumbent fares at the polls.

We use a variety of indicators for local government performance. All are drawn from the Audit Commission. Since this paper is explaining electoral support, we focus on indicators of those dimensions of performance that voters tend to concentrate on. First and foremost, these are crime and education. We capture the level of crime by using two highly visible indicators: the number of domestic burglaries per 1000 households (BV126) and the number of vehicle crimes per 1000 population (BV128). We capture educational achievement by using the percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs with a C or better (BV38) as the most highly visible indicator, which also figures prominently in the creation of the well-publicized school league tables. We also look at the percentage of pupils achieving level 4 or above in KS2 maths (BV40). To cover an additional dimension of service performance, we also look at the percentage of planning searches performed within ten days (BV179). All performance data are lagged one year as they are often collected later in the year than elections take place.

Political variables include the vote share of the current incumbent in the last election, indicator variables for Labour-controlled councils and whole-council elections (as opposed to elections by thirds), and the difference between the vote share of the two biggest parties in the last election.

Since there is a fraction of voters with strong partisanship in every council, we include the electoral support for the current incumbent in the previous election as our first explanatory variable. In the case of councils that were controlled by a single party in the year before the election under consideration, this variable contains the vote share of that party in the election preceding the election under consideration. In the case of councils that were controlled by a coalition of two or more parties in the year before the election under

consideration, this variable contains the sum of the vote shares of those major parties (Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats) involved in the coalition in the election preceding the election.

The English local electoral system is not fully distinct from broader national politics. The local parties are largely locally organized, for example in terms of selection of candidates, but run under the banner and regulation of the national party organization. Voters' opinions about national government have strong effects on local incumbents, with unpopularity conventionally seen as having a negative impact on the local party if it is the same as the national incumbent party, and a positive impact if the local incumbent is not of the national party. However, at the same time as evidence of local elections as opinion polls about national government, there is evidence that local voters are capable of making judgements about the local incumbents (Rallings and Thrasher 1997). To control for the effect of governing nationally, we create a dummy variable to indicate Labour councils in the data set. This variable follows James and John (2006).

We include a dummy variable for whole council elections (as opposed to elections by thirds) to take into account the difference in the perceived importance of these elections to voters - especially since voters will feel it is more likely to achieve a change in control in whole-council elections.

Some elections are more competitive than others, as a party may enjoy a comfortable majority in one council but barely maintain control in another. We therefore include the closeness of the last election as an explanatory variable. Closeness is defined as the percentage point difference between the vote share of the party gaining the largest number of votes and the vote share of the party gaining the second largest number of votes.

We use a number of control variables to exclude some alternative explanations for how well the incumbent party does at the polls.

Following the economic voting literature and to capture economic conditions, we use the percentage of the working-age population claiming job seekers' allowance (the claimant rate) in the first quarter of an election year. This variable stems from the UK Office of National Statistics, from whom we obtained the claimant rates for January, February, and March of each year and then took their mean. We use data on the first quarter because it precedes the election and voters should be most attentive to the economic situation they recently encountered as opposed to six months ago. This variable is a proxy for the unemployment rate, which cannot be obtained at local authority level for every year. It is a very good proxy: the correlation between the unemployment rate at local authority level from the 2001 census with the first quarter claimant rate for the first quarter of that year (our indicator) is .96 (92% of the variance in the claimant rate are explained by the unemployment rate).

The fiscal profile of the local government unit may be an influence on local elections. Research on the US (Niemi et al. 1995; Lowry et al. 1998) finds the voters hold governors to account for the level of state taxes although the evidence is not clear cut (Glaser and Hildreth 1996). Martinussen (2004) finds support for local economic and fiscal voting in Norway. In England, some argue that voters punish government with high taxation rates whilst others claim that the public has a re-distributionalist point of view (Hall and Preston 2000). The relationship between local tax and local expenditure is further complicated because grants from central to local government are a very important source of revenue. However, Gibson has challenged the conventional wisdom that local taxes do not affect voting behaviour (Gibson 1988; 1994). Because of the debate about this issue, we include the average council tax per dwelling (in £) as an explanatory variable. The hypothesis is that electors will punish councils for increases and reward them for decreases. Research has also suggested that fiscal

responsibility may not be stable but can change over time, such as the case of its development in Israel in the mid-1990s (Brender 2003).

We also include an index for the degree of deprivation of local authorities and a indicator variable for authorities in a two-tier system in the cross-section models. As these indicators do not vary over time, they would be dropped from our panel data, where they are already implicitly controlled for.

The appendix contains descriptive statistics for these variables for the different estimation samples we use. Note that a substantial number of local authorities are excluded from the estimation samples. The major reason for that is the definition of our dependent variable as vote share of the incumbent. If a council is under no party's control and we do not have information on a coalition controlling this council, we cannot use that council in our models.

Methods and Findings

We estimate models of voting behaviour that contain the variables discussed above. Tables 1 and 2 contain models analyzing cross-sections. The other tables contain panel models that examine within-authority variation: they test how electoral support for the incumbent varies over time as the explanatory variables change. By looking exclusively at variation over time within local authorities, we are able to control for all observed and unobserved characteristics of local authorities that do not change over the time period of our study.² We report Huber-White standard errors for all models to account for heteroskedasticity of unknown form.

² We did Hausman specification tests to see whether it is necessary to use this strong control. These tests compared the fixed-effects models we use to random-effects models that not only capture within-authority variation but also between-authority variation. The tests strongly rejected the null that the strong assumptions underlying random-effects models were met in our sample. We thus resort only to fixed-effects models.

Tables 1 and 2 report cross-sectional results (one data point per local authority), implying that they only exploit variation between the different local authorities. In the next revision of this paper we will include a change model capturing the difference in electoral support between the election following the 2000 consumer satisfaction survey and the election following the 2003 consumer satisfaction survey. That will give us within variation and let us control for all time-unchanging attributes of local authorities.

Table 1 and Table 2 present models examining whether consumer satisfaction, as measured by the Best Value consumer satisfaction surveys, is related to the electoral success of the incumbent. Table 1 contains data from the first survey, carried out in 2000.

[Table 1 about here]

The dependent variable is the vote share in the next election following the consumer satisfaction survey. That is the 2001 election in authorities that held elections in 2001 (for example, the shire counties); it is the 2002 election in authorities that held elections in 2002 but not 2001 (for example, the London boroughs); and finally it is the 2003 election in authorities that held elections in 2003 but not in 2001 and 2002. The main finding from the models in Table 1 is that a ten percentage point higher level of 2000 overall consumer satisfaction is associated with a two percentage point higher support for the incumbent in the next election following the survey (so either in 2001, 2002, or 2003), controlling for the electoral variables, economic variables, and deprivation and two-tier status.

Table 2 contains data from the second Best Value consumer satisfaction survey, carried out between September and November 2003.

[Table 2 about here]

The dependent variable is the vote share in the next election following the consumer satisfaction survey. That is the 2004 election in authorities that held elections in 2004; it is the 2005 election in authorities that held elections in 2005 but not 2004 (for example, the shire counties); and finally it is the 2006 election in authorities that held elections in 2006 but not in 2004 and 2005 (for example, the London boroughs). The main finding from the models in Table 2 is that a ten percentage point higher level of 2000 overall consumer satisfaction is associated with a one percentage point higher support for the incumbent in the next election following the survey (so either in 2004, 2005, or 2006), controlling for the electoral variables, economic variables, and deprivation and two-tier status.

The models in Tables 3 through 5 are fixed effects panel data models. They control for all observed and unobserved time-invariant differences between local authorities. These models additionally contain dummy variables for all but one of the years. We do that because we find evidence substantial autocorrelation, which would cause some standard errors to be too small. The dummy variables for the different years address this issue sufficiently well without sacrificing observations.

Table 3 presents two voting behaviour models that contain a number of highly visible performance indicators covering crime, education, and home buyers.

[Table 3 about here]

In these models we find no discernible relationship at all between public service performance and electoral performance of the incumbent.

We do find quite a bit persistence of support for the party currently in power: the more support the current incumbent had in the previous election, the more support they tend to receive in the current election. More precisely, a one-percentage point increase in electoral support in the previous election tends to predict an increase of about seven tenths of a percentage point in electoral support in the current election. Labour control of the council in the period before the election is statistically unrelated to support for the incumbent. The second consistent finding is that electoral support for the incumbent is lower when whole-council elections are held instead of elections by thirds. The former tend to see about four percentage points less support for the incumbent party/parties. The third political variable that has a strong relationship with the electoral performance of the incumbent is the closeness of the election: for every one-percentage point increase in the vote share difference between the party with the most votes and the second most votes, the incumbent tends to receive two tenths of a percentage point less electoral support. In other words, the closer the election, the more electoral support the incumbent tends to receive. Changes in the unemployment rate do not have a discernible relationship with support for the incumbent. There is a slight positive relationship between increases in council tax and support for the incumbent. We consider this to be proxying for some other change that occurs in line with the increases in council tax.

Does a step change in performance influence voters sufficiently affect the incumbent's vote share discernibly? We examine this question by creating indicator variables for low performance and for very low performance. The former takes on a value of one when a council is rated poor or fair CPA rating by the Audit Commission and the latter only when a council is rated as poor. Table 4 presents the results from estimating such models on the subsample of the panel that held at least two elections after the CPA scores were first published.

[Table 4 about here]

First and foremost, there is evidence for negativity bias, in line with James and John's (2006) finding. When councils are given a rating of poor or fair, electoral support for the incumbent tends to drop by about three and a half percentage points. The relationships between the political variables and the vote share of the incumbent remain remarkably unchanged. In this subsample, a one-percentage point increase in electoral support in the previous election tends to predict an increase in electoral support for the incumbent of about eight tenths of a percentage point, which is only slightly more than in the models in table 3 that are based on a larger sample. Also as above electoral support for the incumbent is lower when whole-council elections are held instead of elections by thirds. The result for the closeness of the election is completely unchanged: for every one-percentage point increase in the vote share difference between the party with the most votes and the second most votes, the incumbent tends to receive two tenths of a percentage point less electoral support. Again, there is no relationship to the claimant rate but a positive relationship between the average council tax and electoral support for the incumbent.

Finally, we interact the performance indicators with the closeness of the election to see whether the hypothesized performance-electoral success relationship might be hidden if one just looks at it in a linear-additive way but would appear if the competitiveness of the election is taken into account. Table 5 presents these models.

[Table 5 about here]

While the political variables retain the relationships already discussed above (except for the closeness of the last election, which becomes statistically insignificant), in no

interactive model does a discernible relationship between public service performance and vote share of the incumbent show up. Since each performance indicator (for example, the rate of burglaries) shows up twice in the interactive models (once by itself and once interacted with the closeness of the elections), one cannot simply conclude the absence of a relationship based on small t-statistics for these terms. Rather, joint tests involving all terms containing performance indicators had to be done. Yet in none of these tests were we able to reject the null hypothesis of no relationship between public service performance and vote share of the incumbent, at any reasonable level of confidence.

Conclusions

We find evidence for a relationship between perceived performance and electoral success of the incumbent and for a relationship between especially low performance and electoral success. On the other hand, we cannot establish any direct linear relationship between “objective” Best Value indicators of performance and support for the incumbent. While this is research in progress, the findings we already report in this paper are consistent with theories of voting that focus on how voters economize on information and how they distinguish between important large and unimportant performance information. Also our findings once again show that the central government’s Best Value performance indicators tap a different dimension from citizens’ evaluations of the quality of these services (Andrews, Boyne, and Walker 2006). As such, from this data we can reject findings from the proportionate model, but find more evidence from a cognitive account based on perceptions of the change, and from more extreme versions of the change. Attempts to model the conditionality of voter decisions did not produce robust results at this stage of the research though there appears to be some negativity bias. Overall we do not reject the performance-

electoral link when moderated by perceptions of services, but need to do further work to probe the relationship more conclusively.

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Appendix

Table A1 presents summary statistics for the different estimation samples: the cross-sections analyzed in Tables 1 and 2, the longer panel analyzed in Tables 3 and 5, and the shorter panel analyzed in Table 4, which covers only the years after the introduction of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1: Cross-sectional regression explaining % vote share of incumbent in the election following the 2000 Best Value consumer satisfaction survey

	(1.1)	(1.2)
Overall consumer satisfaction (BV3)	0.20 (2.94)	0.19 (2.84)
% vote share of <i>current</i> incumbent in <i>last</i> election	0.70 (6.83)	0.70 (6.94)
Labour controls council in the year before the election (dummy)	0.39 (0.30)	0.18 (0.13)
Whole council election (dummy)	-8.94 (8.04)	-8.98 (7.97)
difference between 1st and 2nd largest party vote shares in last election	-0.01 (0.08)	0.01 (0.09)
Year-on-year difference in first quarter claimant rate	-1.88 (1.48)	-1.10 (0.79)
Change in average council tax (in £) from year before election to election year	-0.01 (0.82)	-0.01 (0.71)
Turnout in % of the electorate		0.04 (0.94)
Index of multiple deprivation 2000	-0.03 (0.52)	-0.00 (0.08)
Two tier authority (dummy)	4.31 (3.40)	4.00 (2.84)
Constant	4.63 (0.78)	3.29 (0.54)
Observations	107	107
F-test of H0: “The model explains nothing”	p < .0001	p < .0001
R ²	0.71	0.71

Absolute value of Huber-White t statistics in parentheses.

Table 2: Cross-sectional regression explaining % vote share of incumbent in the election following the 2003 Best Value consumer satisfaction survey

	(2.1)	(2.2)
Overall consumer satisfaction (BV3)	0.09 (2.37)	0.09 (2.34)
% vote share of <i>current</i> incumbent in <i>last</i> election	0.95 (12.19)	0.96 (12.43)
Labour controls council in the year before the election (dummy)	-4.53 (4.20)	-4.57 (4.36)
Whole council election (dummy)	-4.60 (2.27)	-4.28 (2.12)
difference between 1st and 2nd largest party vote shares in last election	-0.01 (0.23)	-0.01 (0.14)
Year-on-year difference in first quarter claimant rate	-0.78 (0.46)	0.24 (0.13)
Change in average council tax (in £) from year before election to election year	-0.01 (4.34)	-0.01 (3.79)
Turnout in % of the electorate		0.06 (1.22)
Index of multiple deprivation 2004	-0.04 (0.68)	-0.01 (0.10)
Two tier authority (dummy)	2.40 (2.30)	1.80 (1.43)
Constant	-0.49 (0.13)	-4.22 (0.84)
Observations	111	111
F-test of H0: “The model explains nothing”	p < .0001	p < .0001
R ²	0.78	0.78

Absolute value of Huber-White t statistics in parentheses.

Table 3: Two-way fixed effects panel regressions explaining % vote share of incumbent

	(3.1)	(3.2)
Lag of domestic burglaries per 1000 household	-0.04 (0.39)	
Lag of vehicle crimes per 1000 population		-0.02 (0.30)
Lag of % of pupil achieving 5 or more A*-C GCSEs	-0.09 (0.60)	-0.08 (0.57)
Lag of % of planning searches within 10 days	0.03 (0.63)	0.03 (0.63)
% vote share of <i>current</i> incumbent in <i>last</i> election	0.72 (6.14)	0.73 (6.50)
Labour controls council in the year before the election (dummy)	-1.74 (1.06)	-1.79 (1.09)
Whole council election (dummy)	-4.43 (2.18)	-4.45 (2.17)
Difference between vote share of 2 biggest parties LAST election	-0.20 (2.17)	-0.20 (2.18)
Ave. claimant rate in the 1st quarter (Jan, Feb, Mar)	0.26 (0.21)	0.09 (0.07)
Lag of average council tax per dwelling (in £)	0.01 (2.34)	0.01 (2.19)
Observations	257	257
Number of local authorities	105	105
F-test of H0: "The model explains nothing"	p < .0001	p < .0001
Joint F-test of H0: "Performance explains nothing"	p = .84	p = .86
R ² within	0.63	0.63
R ² between	0.54	0.54
R ² overall	0.57	0.57

Absolute value of Huber-White t statistics in parentheses.

Table 4: Two-way fixed effects panel regressions explaining % vote share of incumbent

	(4.1)	(4.2)
CPA rating “fair” or “poor” (dummy)	-3.66 (1.75)	
CPA rating “poor” (dummy)		-3.37 (1.32)
% vote share of <i>current</i> incumbent in <i>last</i> election	0.84 (5.13)	0.82 (4.72)
Labour controls council in the year before the election (dummy)	-3.68 (1.54)	-3.65 (1.46)
Whole council election (dummy)	-6.81 (2.22)	-8.06 (2.42)
Difference between vote share of 2 biggest parties LAST election	-0.22 (1.85)	-0.22 (1.70)
Ave. claimant rate in the 1st quarter (Jan, Feb, Mar)	-1.57 (0.65)	-0.24 (0.11)
Lag of average council tax per dwelling (in £)	0.02 (4.39)	0.01 (2.71)
Observations	205	205
Number of local authorities	127	127
F-test of H0: “The model explains nothing”	p < .0001	p < .0001
R ² within	0.68	0.67
R ² between	0.31	0.41
R ² overall	0.37	0.48

Absolute value of Huber-White t statistics in parentheses.

Table 5: Two-way fixed effects panel regressions explaining % vote share of incumbent

	(5.1)	(5.2)	(5.3)
Lag of domestic burglaries per 1000 household	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.24)	0.01 (0.08)
Lag of % of pupil achieving 5 or more A*-C GCSEs	-0.19 (0.95)	-0.19 (0.93)	
Lag of % of planning searches within 10 days	0.10 (1.73)		
Interaction of burglaries and difference between vote share of 2 biggest parties in the last election	-0.00 (0.33)	-0.00 (0.35)	-0.00 (0.65)
Interaction of GCSE results and difference between vote share of 2 biggest parties in the last election	0.01 (1.36)	0.00 (0.88)	
Interaction of planning searches and difference between vote share of 2 biggest parties in the last election	-0.01 (1.61)		
% vote share of <i>current</i> incumbent in <i>last</i> election	0.75 (6.57)	0.74 (6.12)	0.74 (6.16)
Labour controls council in the year before the election (dummy)	-1.75 (1.10)	-1.80 (1.07)	-1.68 (1.03)
Whole council election (dummy)	-4.51 (2.14)	-4.62 (2.24)	-4.48 (2.20)
Difference between vote share of 2 biggest parties in the last election	0.09 (0.21)	-0.38 (1.18)	-0.11 (0.70)
Ave. claimant rate in the 1st quarter (Jan, Feb, Mar)	0.10 (0.08)	0.22 (0.17)	0.39 (0.31)
Lag of average council tax per dwelling (in £)	0.01 (1.95)	0.01 (2.16)	0.01 (2.10)
Observations	257	257	257
Number of local authorities	105	105	105
F-test of H0: "The model explains nothing"	p < .0001	p < .0001	p < .0001
Joint F-test of H0: "Performance explains nothing"	p = .40	p = .83	p = .74
R ² within	0.65	0.64	0.63
R ² between	0.56	0.56	0.57
R ² overall	0.58	0.58	0.60

Absolute value of Huber-White t statistics in parentheses.

Table A1: Summary statistics for the different estimation samples

	Table 1	Table 2	Tables 3 and 5	Table 4
Number of local authorities	107	111	105	127
Number of observations	107	111	257	205
<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
% vote share of the incumbent	43.2 [7.6]	39.8 [8.4]	41.4 [8.5]	40.4 [8.0]
<i>Performance variables:</i>				
Overall consumer satisfaction (BV3)	60.0 [8.7]	52.5 [9.5]		
Lag of domestic burglaries per 1000 household			23.2 [10.4]	
Lag of vehicle crimes per 1000 population			22.7 [8.8]	
Lag of % of pupil achieving 5 or more A*-C GCSEs			47.1 [8.4]	
Lag of % of planning searches within 10 days			93.5 [13.0]	
CPA rating “fair” or “poor” (dummy)				0.17 [0.37]
CPA rating “poor” (dummy)				0.05 [0.23]
<i>Political variables:</i>				
% vote share of <i>current</i> incumbent in <i>last</i> election	44.8 [6.7]	43.9 [7.5]	44.1 [7.7]	43.9 [7.3]
Labour controls council in the year before the election (dummy)	0.71 [0.45]	0.49 [0.50]	0.68 [0.47]	0.56 [0.50]
Whole council election (dummy)	0.61 [0.49]	0.80 [0.40]	0.44 [0.50]	0.53 [0.50]
Difference between vote share of 2 biggest parties in the last election	13.7 [9.9]	12.8 [9.6]	13.7 [10.1]	12.9 [9.6]
<i>Control variables:</i>				
Year-on-year difference in first quarter (Jan, Feb, Mar) claimant rate	-0.17 [0.29]	-0.002 [0.365]		
Ave. claimant rate in the 1st quarter (Jan, Feb, Mar)			3.21 [1.17]	2.98 [1.20]
Change in average council tax (in £) from year before election to election year	50.5 [28.0]	43.8 [95.8]		
Lag of average council tax per dwelling (in £)			807 [175]	874 [180]
Turnout in % of the electorate	39.3 [14.0]	43.9 [11.8]		
Index of multiple deprivation	30.2 [11.8]	29.1 [12.4]		
Two tier authority (dummy)	0.39 [0.49]	0.50 [0.50]		